Title of the Invention

SEATING DEVICE INCLUDING A HELMET HEATING RACK

Related Application

This application is a continuation-in-part of pending United States patent application serial no. 09/716,007 filed on November 17, 2000 for a SEATING DEVICE, the entire disclosure of which is fully incorporated herein by reference. This application also claims the benefit of United States Provisional patent application serial no. 60/166,607 filed on November 19, 1999 for a SEATING DEVICE, the entire disclosure of which is fully incorporated herein by reference.

Field of the Invention

The subject invention relates generally to devices designed to warm persons participating in cold climate activities. More particularly, the invention relates to a seating device useful for warming the bodies and equipment of participants in cold-weather athletic events such as football games.

Background of the Invention

The desire to provide a heat source for those observers or participants in athletic events who are not actively engaged in the athletic contest — coaches, substitute players, the offensive or defensive squads that are alternatively on the sideline or on the playing field, etc. — has led to the development and use of various personnel warming devices. Known warmers include torpedo heaters and other space heaters designed to blow hot air into a general area, heated benches for seating, and heated bench-like structures that can be used as seats or that otherwise serve as radiant sources of heat. The present invention represents an improvement to known heated benches and bench-like structures, as it is a more effective and comfortable means of

warming the entire body of a person who is required or desires to sit or stand for long periods of time in a cold environment.

Known heated benches have not been designed to be effective and convenient total body warmers. For example, U.S. Patent No. 3,948,246 to Jenkins discloses a bench wherein heated air under pressure is moved from a heating source through a conduit and into a mostly hollow bench structure. The Jenkins bench is perforated in multiple locations, thus providing necessary outlets for exhausting the pressurized air, and also creating streams of heated air blowing onto whoever is sitting on the bench. However, neither Jenkins nor any other known bench is effectively able to route this exhausted air so that it envelopes the entire body of the sitter(s) without the use of flexible hoses extending from the bench. The known benches are only effective when sat upon, and even then their effectiveness is limited to warming only the backside of the sitters. So in addition to only heating one side of the body, these benches also essentially deprive a person of the option of standing if that person wishes to experience any warmth at all.

In addition to the shortcomings discussed above, known heated benches do a particularly poor job of warming a person's feet. Jenkins provides for a compartment at the back of the bench into which the feet may be inserted, and U.S. Patent No. 4,134,615, also to Jenkins, provides a bench that requires a person to pull his lower legs and feet back into a compartment located in the front of the bench. In the first scenario, a person cannot warm his feet while simultaneously warming the rest of his body, because foot warming requires that the person stand behind the bench. In the second scenario, a person must sit uncomfortably to warm his feet.

Cylindrical bench-like structures, like that disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,676,223 to Huls, have also been used as heat sources for participants at outdoor athletic events. The Huls device operates on many of the same basic principles as do the heated benches, but lacks the advantage of providing a back support for anyone wishing to sit upon the device. This device has been equipped with perforations for exhausting hot air at regular intervals along the length and circumference of the device, however, making standing near the device more of an option than it is with a heated bench. But the person standing near the device will not be fully enveloped in heated air, thereby leaving the side of his or her body facing away from the device exposed to the cold. Another disadvantage is that one cannot sit on the device and simultaneously warm his feet. Foot warming requires that the person face the cylindrical heater, standing with his toes beneath the drum.

Providing a heat source for participants in cold-climate athletic events not only makes exposure to cold temperatures more bearable from a comfort standpoint, it also enhances the performance and safety of the participants in such conditions. For example, warm muscles are more limber and less prone to injury than are muscles that become tight as a result of inactivity in cold temperatures. Moreover, in contact sports such as football, the force of a collision is less painful — and potentially less injurious — to a warm body.

Minimizing the risk of injury is obviously important in any activity, regardless of climate. And protecting the head is particularly important in activities where the potential for head trauma is high. As a result, helmets are often mandatory or highly recommended equipment for participation in such activities. Logically, maintaining a helmet in its optimal condition helps optimize the helmet's effectiveness. It has been observed, however, that when a helmet is

exposed to cold temperatures, its padding can be adversely affected, and the helmet's effectiveness can be compromised.

A helmet's padding serves the dual purpose of absorbing the force of a blow to the helmet and ensuring that the helmet fits its wearer properly. To do this consistently, the padding must be able to maintain its elasticity in all conditions and circumstances. But when cold, the padding hardens. When its pads harden, a helmet becomes difficult to put on, and more importantly, the helmet's ability to protect the head is compromised. Instead of absorbing the force of a blow to the helmet, the hardened pads become an instrument through which the force is delivered to the head. The helmet's wearer is thereby exposed to a greater risk of head injury.

Heat radiating from a player's head generally keeps the padding in his helmet from hardening in cold temperatures. But it is not always practical or desirable for a football player to wear his helmet when not participating in the game or practice. In addition to the padding of his helmet hardening, a secondary problem often arises when a player removes his helmet — the player frequently forgets where he placed it when he took it off.

It is therefore an objective of this invention to provide an apparatus which effectively heats the interior padding of helmets or other equipment, while providing a structure for the convenient placement of such equipment.

It is another objective of this invention to provide an efficient and effective heating system for warming the entire body of a person required or desiring to sit or stand for extended periods in a cold environment.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to one embodiment, the invention provides a seating device or a personnel warming system having an improved heated bench in combination with a heated deck which

extends from a base of the footwall of the bench. A person may either sit on the bench with his feet resting on the deck in front of him, or he may stand on the deck itself. In either case, the invention effectively provides heat to the person's entire body, especially including the feet.

The bench is a substantially hollow structure that is warmed by heated air that is forced into an interior space defined by the bench. The entire outer surface of the bench is warmed by this process. The heated pressurized air is exhausted from the interior space of the bench and into a substantially hollow deck which extends outwardly from the base of the footwall of the bench. The deck has perforations in its top surface through which the heated, pressurized air is exhausted from the bench.

The bench configuration described above takes maximum advantage of the hot air that is exhausted from the heating system, creating a zone of hot air directly in front of the bench and above its deck that is sufficiently large enough to heat the front side of a person sitting on the bench. While sitting on the bench, a person's feet would be resting comfortably on the heated deck in front of him, keeping his feet warm and placing his lower legs in the path of the exhausted hot air. Moreover, the front side of the person's upper torso would also be in the zone of heated air.

The present invention also provides a person with the option of standing on the deck and still experiencing full body warmth. The zone of heated air originating from the perforations in the top surface of the deck extends high enough to fully envelope a person that is standing on the deck. The deck is an especially effective heating source when the person standing on it is wearing a parka or other long overgarment that is open at its bottom. In this situation, the hot air rising from the deck fills the interior space defined by the garment worn by the person standing over the exhaust. In the case of a parka worn in conjunction with the use of the present

invention, the garment will retain its designed shape and the hot air exhausted from the deck is essentially trapped within the garment, providing additional warmth for the wearer. As the use of parkas is common among football teams, this is a significant advantage.

The present invention contemplates, in one embodiment, a seating device having a heated helmet rack. The seating device comprises a bench fluidly connected to an air source, the bench having a frontal wall, a deck, and defining an interior space. The bench receives air from the air source into its interior space and exhausts the air through perforations in the frontal wall into the deck. The deck defines an interior space into which the air is received. The deck has a top surface and extends from the frontal wall of the bench. The air is exhausted from the deck through perforations in its top surface. The seating device also has a rack structure comprising a heating element, a duct having a plurality of substantially hollow posts, each of the posts having a terminal support, and each terminal support having at least one opening.

Another aspect of the heating rack is that the heating element be an electric heater or the air source of the bench. In an embodiment where the heating element is the air source, the heating rack is attached to the bench by a series of hollow connectors which allow the air received into the bench from the air source to be exhausted out of the bench through the connectors and into the duct. In accordance with another aspect of this embodiment of the invention, the bench and the heating rack comprise a unibody construction comprised of injection-molded fiberglass.

The present invention contemplates, in another embodiment of the invention, a rack for heating helmets and other equipment comprising a heating element fluidly connected to a duct, the duct having a plurality of hollow posts, each of the posts having a terminal support, and each terminal support having a top surface and at least one opening. In accordance with one aspect of

the invention, the heating element is an electric heater; in accordance with another aspect of the invention, the heating element is a substantially hollow bench into which heated air is received from an air source, and to which the rack is mounted.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the top surface of the terminal support is dome-shaped. The terminal support can be comprised of a cap having a diameter of 4 to 4.5 inches and a height of 4 to 4.5 inches.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the duct comprises a linear arrangement of a plurality of duct sections and tee connectors; a post is joined to the duct at each tee connector. The rack may also comprise a plurality of support structures that allow the rack to be mounted on vertical or horizontal surfaces, or to be a free-standing device.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, the rack comprises a unibody injection-molded construction having either an electric heater or a substantially hollow bench into which heated air is received from an air source as its heating element.

A benefit of the present invention is that it prevents the padding in football or other helmets from hardening in cold temperatures. Another benefit of the present invention is that its rack framework provides a structure for the convenient placement of helmets, therefore making it easier for a player to locate his own helmet when it is needed.

Other objects and advantages of the present invention will be apparent from the drawings and detailed discussions presented below.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1A is a perspective side view of the device of the present invention.

FIG. 1B is a perspective front view of the device of the present invention.

FIG. 1C is a perspective top view of the device of the present invention.

FIG. 1D is a perspective side view of the device of the present invention, illustrating the opposing side view of the device as that illustrated in FIG. 1A.

FIG. 1E is a side view of the invention, illustrated with the deck extending from the base of the footwall of the bench.

FIG. 2 is a top view of the invention illustrated with the deck extending from the base of the footwall of the bench.

FIG. 3 is a backview of the invention.

FIG. 4 is a side view of a first embodiment of the invention, illustrated with a retractile deck in the closed position.

FIG. 5 is a top view of a second embodiment of the invention, illustrated with a retractile deck in the closed position.

FIG. 6 is a front view of the invention. All embodiments of the invention in its operable form will substantially share this basic appearance.

FIG. 7 is a back view of an embodiment of the deck portion of the invention.

FIG. 8 is a front view of a first embodiment of the bench portion of the invention.

FIG. 9 is a front view of a second embodiment of the bench portion of the invention.

FIG. 10 is a perspective back view of an embodiment of the invention having a helmet heating rack attached thereto.

FIG. 11 is a back view of the helmet heating rack portion of the invention.

FIG. 12 is a perspective front view of an embodiment of the invention having a helmet heating rack attached thereto.

FIG. 13 is a perspective front view of an embodiment of the invention having a helmet heating rack attached thereto and illustrating the opposing perspective view of the device as that illustrated in FIG. 12.

FIG 14 is a front view of an embodiment of the invention having a helmet heating rack attached thereto.

Detailed Description Of The Invention

Referring to Figs 1A - 1E, the inventive heated bench/deck combination is a seating device or a personnel warming system comprised of a bench **6** defining an interior space **8** bordered by the internal surface **11** of the bench and a substantially hollow deck **12**, which when the invention is in operation, extends outwardly from a base **9** of the front wall portion or footwall **22** of the bench. The footwall **22** is defined herein as the substantially vertical portion at the front of the bench, against which the back of the lower legs of a person sitting on the bench would rest. The footwall **22** runs in a substantially vertical direction from the seating surface **24** of the bench to at least the top surface **14** of the deck, and possibly to the base of the bench, depending on the embodiment of the invention. The seating surface **24** of the bench is defined herein as the substantially horizontal portion of the bench against which generally the buttocks and upper legs of a sitting person would rest.

The interior space **8** of the bench is designed to receive heated pressurized air. This air is produced by a heat source **2**. The heat source **2** may be located within the interior space **8** of the bench or it may be external to the bench, as illustrated. Where the heat source **2** is external to the bench, the heated, pressurized air is forced into the interior space **8** of the bench through an inlet conduit **4** that is fluidly connected to the heat source **2** and the bench **6** in the direction of the illustrated arrow. The heat source **2** can be any hot air generating device including, but not

limited to, combustion heaters or electric resistance heaters. The heat source **2** may or may not be self-contained. It is preferred that the heat source **2** be a combustion heater fueled by natural gas.

The heated pressurized air forced into the interior space **8** of the bench must be exhausted out of the warming system. This exhaustion is accomplished through perforations **10** in either the footwall **22**, as shown in FIG. 8, or the back wall **16** of the deck, as shown in FIG. 7. The structure in which the perforations **10** are located depends upon the particular embodiment of the invention. Regardless of the structure in which the perforations **10** are technically located, when the invention is in operation, the perforations **10** will be, as illustrated, in an otherwise continuous wall that runs from the base of the bench to the seating surface **24** and that occupies the same plane as the footwall **22**. This continuous wall is referred to hereinafter as the frontal wall **28**. FIG. 1E illustrates an embodiment of the frontal wall **28** wherein the frontal wall **28** is comprised of a combination of the footwall **22** and the back wall **16** of the deck **12**. FIG. 8 illustrates how the frontal wall **28** could be comprised entirely of the footwall **22.** FIGS. 7 and 9 illustrate the separate bench **6** and deck **12** structures that might be combined to form the frontal wall **28** as depicted in FIG. 1E.

The heated, pressurized air is exhausted through the perforations **10** in the base of the frontal wall **28** and into a substantially hollow deck **12**. The deck is designed to extend outwardly from the footwall **22** of the bench. The deck has perforations **20** in its top surface **14** through which the heated pressurized air is exhausted from the deck and from the inventive seating device entirely. The deck may be a separate component from the bench, or it may be part of a unibody construction with the bench. It is preferred that that the deck **12** be a separate component which is retractable within the interior space **8** of the bench. FIGS. 4 and 5 illustrate

this preferred embodiment of the invention in its closed or retracted position. In the retracted position, the front wall **18** of the deck is flush with and forms a continuous frontal wall **28** (free of perforations) with the footwall **22**. In the extended or operable position of the preferred embodiment of the invention, the back wall **16** of the deck is flush and forms a continuous frontal wall **28** with the footwall **22**, except for the perforations **10**. The perforations **10** are located at the base of the frontal wall **28**, the base of the frontal wall being comprised of the back wall **16** of the deck.

It is preferred that the deck **12** have a sloped interior floor **26** so that water condensing in or running into the deck can be drained away from the interior of the deck. Additionally, in the embodiment of deck **6** illustrated in FIGS. 1A-1D, includes a top surface **14** having a plurality of perforations **20**. Heated pressurized air is exhausted from the deck via the perforations. Front and side edge portions **86**, **87** respectively, extend from the top surface **14** to the ground **G**. The front and side edge portions **86**, **87** are sloped to provide effective drainage and avoid having the deck become a trip hazard. It is also preferred that the retractable deck **12** be entirely removable from the bench **6** so that the interiors of both the bench and the deck are accessible for cleaning. Handles **80** can be used to lift and transport the bench **6**. As is disclosed in FIG. 10, the bench can also come equipped with wheels **81** at both ends to also assist in the transport of the bench. In this embodiment, the wheels **81** are capable of being locked into a down position whereby the wheels engage the ground and the bottom of the bench is elevated off of the ground. The wheels **81** may also be locked into an up position whereby the wheels will not be in operation and the bottom of the bench engages the ground.

In every embodiment of the invention disclosed thus far, the operation of the invention has been dependent upon the use of a heat source **2**. The invention is operable with any source

of pressurized air, however. So although the primary use of the bench and deck is as a total body warmer in cold temperatures, the invention may also be employed as a cooling device in hot environments. This is accomplished through the substitution of an air conditioning unit for the heat source **2** in the operation of the bench and deck. In this embodiment of the invention, cool air is forced into the interior space **8** of the bench **6** and exhausted through the perforations **20** in the deck **12**. The cool air entering the interior space **8** of the bench **6** lowers the temperature of the seating surface **24** of the bench **6**. The air that is exhausted out of the deck perforations **20** will cool the front side of a person sitting on the bench **6** or fully envelope a person standing on the deck **12**. In other words, the invention's basic operation remains constant no matter whether the air source is an air conditioning unit or a heat source — the air source determines the temperature of the surface of the seating device and of the air that is exhausted therefrom.

Although the bench and deck may be constructed from any suitably strong and conductive material, it is preferred that bench and deck be formed from injection molded fiberglass. It is also preferred that the inventive personnel warming system be capable of supporting a total load of 2000 pounds, the load comprising the total weight of any combination of persons sitting or standing on the device.

Referring to FIG. 10, another embodiment of the invention is illustrated. Shown is a bench **6** and deck **12** combination having a helmet heating rack **110** attached thereto. The heating rack **110** is comprised generally of a heating element **120**, a generally horizontal hollow duct **130**, and a series of generally vertically extending posts **140**. Each post **140** has a terminal support **150** upon which a helmet can be placed. And each post **140** also has at least one opening **160** located in the terminal support **150**. In the operation of the heating rack **110**, heated air generated by the heating element **120** enters the duct **130**. The duct **130** is typically a linear

structure which is open at only one end. The heated air flows into the duct **130** at one end and then into each of the posts **140** located in spaced relationships along the length of the duct **130**. The posts **140** are substantially hollow structures which function as conduits of the heated air. In one embodiment of the invention, the distance between each post **140** on the duct **130** is anywhere in the range from 11 to 12 inches. The heated air is exhausted from the posts **140** through at least one opening **160** located in the terminal support **150** of each of the posts **140**. Helmets or other pieces of equipment can be placed on the terminal supports **150** of the posts **140**. The heated air exhausted out of the openings **160** then enters the interior space of the helmets and heats their padding. In one embodiment of the invention, the openings **160** are spaced 90° apart around the circumference of the terminal support **150**.

Use of heating rack **110** is not limited to heating football or other helmets. The heating rack **110** is capable of use for warming clothing and equipment such as, but not limited to, jackets, jerseys, sweatshirts, sweaters, pants, socks, shoes, hard hats, gloves or any other items that are capable of fitting over or resting on the terminal support **150**. Either the heating rack **110** or the bench **6** may be marked with indicia so that a person will know upon which specific terminal support **150** he is supposed to place his own equipment. For instance, the indicia may be a number corresponding to the jersey number of a football player. The indicia will help a player to know where his helmet or other equipment is located when he needs to use it.

The terminal support **150** of the post **140** is the portion of the post **140** that is designed to be located in the interior space of a helmet when a helmet is placed on the heating rack **110**. The terminal support **150** is the structure that receives the helmet onto the rack **110** and through which the heated air is delivered to the helmet's padding. To properly accommodate a football helmet or other head-gear, the top surface **155** of the terminal support **150** can be dome-shaped

so that it is compatible with the shape of the interior surface of the top of the helmet. As is shown FIG. 11, the terminal support **150** can be comprised of a cap **153** which fits securely over the post **140**. In one embodiment of the invention, the cap will be 4 to 4.5 inches in diameter and have a height of 4 to 4.5 inches.

In the embodiment of the invention illustrated in FIG. 11, the duct **130** is comprised of a series of duct segments **133** that are joined together by tee connectors **137**. In this embodiment of the invention, the posts **140** are also joined to the duct **130** by the tee connectors **137**. The duct segments **133** and posts **140** can be joined to the tee connectors **137** by threaded engagement or by other known means of mechanical or chemical fastening, such as, but not limited to, screws, nuts and bolts, clamps, welds, or adhesives In another embodiment of the invention, the duct **130**, the posts **140** and the terminal supports **150** can comprise a unibody construction, typically made from a mold.

The heating rack **110** can be configured to utilize heated air generated by a variety of known heating devices. For instance, in one embodiment of the invention, the heating element **120** is an electric heater. The basic operation of electric heaters is well known in the art. As the invention is configured in FIG. 11, the electric heater would be housed in a compartment **122** that is connected directly to the duct **130**. It is not necessary that the heating element **120** be positioned so that it is directly adjoining or adjacent to the duct **130**, however. For example, the electric heater or another heating element **120** can be connected to one or more ducts **130** via an appropriate length of hose or tubing. In another embodiment of the invention, the heating element **120** could be the heat source **2** remotely located from the duct **130** and connected thereto by a hose. Regardless of whether the heating element is positioned in close or remote proximity to the duct **130** however, it is preferred that the heating element **120** be sealingly connected to the

duct **130** so that the heated air generated by the heating element is not permitted to escape into the atmosphere before it can enter the duct **130**. In addition to electric heaters, heaters fueled by natural gas, kerosene, gasoline or even wood could, for example, be utilized as the heating element **120** for the helmet rack **110**. The heating element **120** utilized in connection with the rack **110** should optimally be capable of safely heating air to a temperature range of 75 to 80°F.

It is known to utilize a fan or other blower apparatus in connection with a heater to move the heated air and to increase the area that the heater is effectively able to warm. In that spirit, the heating rack **110** of the present invention may similarly be equipped with a fan or other blower apparatus that forces the air heated by the heating element **120** through the duct **130**. In one embodiment of the invention, the electric heater used as the heating element **120** is equipped with a fan. The fan directs the heated air generated by the electric heater into the duct **130**. In any embodiment of the invention employing a fan or other blower, the device should be capable directing the heated air through the duct **130** with enough force that the heated air is exhausted out of the openings **160** of every post **140**. The electric heater sold by McMaster-Carr Supply Company as Part No. 3092K97, which is equipped with a fan, has been demonstrated to be acceptable as a heating element **120** for use in this invention.

FIG. 10 illustrates an embodiment of the invention wherein the heating rack **110** is shown connected to the inventive bench **6** disclosed herein. In this embodiment, the heating rack **110** is mounted to the bench **6** by a series of support structures **127**. To reduce stress on the duct **130**, it is preferred that a support structure **127** be attached to the heating rack **110** every 3 to 4 feet along the length of the duct **130**. Through the use of different types of support structures **127**, the heating rack **110** is capable of being a free-standing device or a device capable of use in combination with other structures. For instance, in an embodiment that utilizes legs as support

structures **127**, the rack would be free-standing. In another embodiment of the invention, the support structures **127** are brackets. Depending on the orientation of the brackets in relation to the duct **130**, the rack **110** can be mounted to a wall or other vertical surface, or to a table or other horizontal surface.

When mounted to a bench **6** as is shown in FIG. 10, it is also possible that the heating rack **110** can utilize the bench **6** as the heating element **120** for the heating rack **110**. For this to occur, the support structures **127** would be substantially hollow, and the heated air that is circulating through the bench **6** would be exhausted out of openings in the back of the bench **6** and into the support structure **127**. It is preferred that the support structures **127** be sealingly mounted over the openings in the back of the bench **6** to prevent the heated air from escaping into the atmosphere before entering the support structure **127**. The hot air would enter the duct **130** from the support structure **127**. In this embodiment of the invention, it is possible that the bench and the heating rack comprise an injection-molded unibody construction.

In one embodiment of the invention the duct **130** and the posts **140** are made from poly-vinyl chloride ("PVC"). It is not necessary that the components comprising the helmet heating rack **110** be made from the same material, however. These component can be made from any combination of any material known to be used for conducting air, provided that the material has sufficient strength to support the number of helmets that the rack **110** is designed to hold.